

**REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE****Form Approved**  
**OMB No. 0704-0188**

Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden to Washington Headquarters Service, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302, and to the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reduction Project (0704-0188) Washington, DC 20503.

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<b>1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY)</b> 06-06-2010		<b>2. REPORT TYPE</b> Master of Military Studies Research Paper		<b>3. DATES COVERED (From - To)</b> September 2009 - April 2010	
<b>4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE</b> A Critical Analysis of Robert E. Lee's Campaign Plan for a Second Northern Invasion				<b>5a. CONTRACT NUMBER</b> N/A	
				<b>5b. GRANT NUMBER</b> N/A	
				<b>5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER</b> N/A	
<b>6. AUTHOR(S)</b> Jameson, Heath B.				<b>5d. PROJECT NUMBER</b> N/A	
				<b>5e. TASK NUMBER</b> N/A	
				<b>5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER</b> N/A	
<b>7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b> USMC Command and Staff College Marine Corps University 2076 South Street Quantico, VA 22134-5068				<b>8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER</b> N/A	
<b>9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b> N/A				<b>10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)</b> N/A	
				<b>11. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY REPORT NUMBER</b> N/A	
<b>12. DISTRIBUTION AVAILABILITY STATEMENT</b> Unlimited					
<b>13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES</b> N/A					
<b>14. ABSTRACT</b> Prior to invading Pennsylvania, General Robert E. Lee identified the North's center of gravity as the will of the northern populace to continue the war in an effort to preserve the Union. However, if he could not affect the North's ability to make war, then he would have to devise a plan to affect the North's will to perpetuate the Civil War. Influenced by his earlier victories, Lee overestimated his capabilities, the abilities of his commanders to discern commander's intent and underestimated their need for guidance on strategic endstate. Lee's hopes that his audacious actions could produce a profound effect on the will of the northern populace to maintain the Union and sway the Federal government and military to capitulate was based on assumption wrought with flaws. A combination of mistakes prior to and during his march north led to the Confederate General's failure to link what he wanted to achieve tactically and operationally, to how he saw victory for the Confederacy strategically in a second Northern campaign.					
<b>15. SUBJECT TERMS</b> General Robert E. Lee, Northern Campaign, Northern Invasion, Strategic, Operational, Plan, Confederate, Confederacy, Union, Federal, Army of Northern Virginia, Army of the Potomac, Battle of Chancellorsville, Battle of Gettysburg					
<b>16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:</b>			<b>17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT</b> UU	<b>18. NUMBER OF PAGES</b> 30	<b>19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON</b> Marine Corps University / Command and Staff College
<b>a. REPORT</b> Unclass	<b>b. ABSTRACT</b> Unclass	<b>c. THIS PAGE</b> Unclass			<b>19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (Include area code)</b> (703) 784-3330 (Admin Office)

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Command and Staff College  
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2076 South Street  
Marine Corps Combat Development Command  
Quantico, VA 22134-5068

MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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**A Critical Analysis of Robert E. Lee's Campaign Plan  
for a Second Northern Invasion**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

**Major Heath B. Jameson, USMC**

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## **Executive Summary**

**Title:** A Critical Analysis of Robert E. Lee's Campaign Plan for a Second Northern Invasion

**Author:** Major Heath Jameson, United States Marine Corps

**Thesis:** General Lee identified the North's center of gravity as the will of the northern populace to continue the war in an effort to maintain the Union. If he could not affect the North's ability to make war, then he would have to devise a plan to affect the North's will to continue the Civil War. Influenced by his earlier victories, Lee overestimated his capabilities, the abilities of his commanders to discern commander's intent and underestimated their need for guidance on strategic endstate. As a result, Lee's plan for a second Northern campaign was flawed.

**Discussion:** General Robert E. Lee took command of the Eastern Theater and the Army of Northern Virginia in the spring of 1862. Afterwards, the Confederate Army in the East began having immense operational success. They defeated the Union Army on numerous occasions from the Seven Days Battle in the summer of 1862 to the Battle of Chancellorsville in the spring 1863. As his triumphs against the Union Army continued, he began gaining confidence as a commander. After the Battle of Chancellorsville, his army was at its height in strength and morale more than at any other time during the war. The South had several options in the Eastern Theater at this point. For instance, Lee and Davis considered continuing fighting a long defensive war on southern soil in hopes that the North would capitulate because of exhaustion. Even though this option had a high probability of success, time was not on the Confederate's side. Confederate resources were diminishing and the devastation of war was taking its toll on the southern economy and farmland. Another option was to go on the offensive and attack the Army of the Potomac across the Rappahannock River in an effort to exploit the Confederate's recent success at Chancellorsville. Lastly, in an effort to defeat the enemy, destroy the will of the northern populace to maintain the Union, and increase anxiety among the Federal government, Lee envisioned maneuvering his army onto northern soil for a second time during the Civil War. By shifting the war from one fought purely on southern land, to one in which both sides would feel its devastation, Lee believed he could force the North to sue for peace vice continuing. In a meeting between Confederate President Jefferson Davis and Lee, both men agreed that a second Northern campaign was the most viable option.

**Conclusion:** General Lee's hopes that his audacious actions could produce such a profound effect on the will of the northern populace to maintain the Union and sway the Federal government and military to capitulate was based on assumption wrought with flaws. A combination of mistakes prior to and during his march north led to the Confederate general's failure to link what he wanted to achieve tactically and operationally, to how he saw victory for the Confederacy strategically in a second Northern campaign.

## **Preface**

The inspiration for this paper stems from years of hearing the legacy of General Robert E. Lee. As a southerner, the name Robert E. Lee was a household name; though, I never actively pursued an in-depth study of the Confederate general until now. After participating in military staff rides to both the battlefields of Chancellorsville and Gettysburg, I found myself asking why General Lee invaded Pennsylvania. What did he envision as victory? This study is an effort to answer those questions.

During the research for this essay, I spent countless hours in the library studying/reading books written by Civil War historians and enthusiasts. However, the main research tool used in this study was source documents. Chiefly, the Official Records of the Civil War, General Lee's Wartime Papers, as well as the biographies of Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis.

Two key contributors and/or advisors influenced the focus and direction of this paper. I would like to thank my wife Julie Jameson for providing advice, suggestions, and inspiration in writing this essay. In addition, I would like to express sincere gratitude and appreciation to Dr. Brad Wineman for his focused guidance, formatting supervision, and whose patience and mentorship allowed for the accomplishment of this thesis.

## **Introduction**

General Robert E Lee's invasion of Pennsylvania on a second Northern campaign in the summer of 1863 and the crucial Battle of Gettysburg that ensued was one of the most pivotal strategic decisions of the American Civil War. In the spring of 1863, Union forces pressured the Confederacy on all fronts, particularly in the west. Moreover, as the war continued, the Confederacy was gradually losing public support not only from within its own populace but from the Northern anti-war movement and European sympathizers. The ravaged South was devastated economically and agriculturally. The Confederacy found it increasingly difficult to resupply its troops with much needed reinforcements and provisions. Realizing the Confederate's precarious situation and the need for some relief from Union pressure in the summer of 1863, General Lee consulted with President Jefferson Davis in an attempt to define a strategic objective that could provide victory for the Confederacy. It was clear that the South could not match the North's ability to make war as they lacked the manpower and industrial might. If it was not possible to gain victory through military means alone then the South would have to come up with an alternative solution. General Lee identified the North's center of gravity as the will of the northern populace to continue the war in an effort to preserve the Union. If he could not affect the North's ability to make war, then he would have to devise a plan to affect the North's will to perpetuate the Civil War. Influenced by his earlier victories, Lee overestimated his capabilities, the abilities of his commanders to discern commander's intent and underestimated their need for guidance on strategic endstate. As a result, Lee's plan for a second Northern campaign was flawed from its conception.

General Lee left the familiar terrain of Virginia and ventured on a Northern campaign to fight the Union Army on their own land, which culminated at the Battle of Gettysburg. This study identifies Lee's successful campaign attributes and outlines several of his victories'

common denominators that led to success from the summer of 1862 until his defeat at the Battle of Gettysburg in the summer of 1863. These combined elements on the field of battle made Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia unstoppable. Finally, it will conclude with an analytic discussion on the Confederate general's operational intentions for campaigning north into Pennsylvania and his vision of strategic victory.

### **Lee's First Attempt to go North**

Following two successful victories against the North during the Seven Days Battle and the Battle of Second Manassas in the summer of 1862, General Lee shifted the war in the Eastern Theater onto northern soil with his push into Maryland at the beginning of September 1862. The goal was to affect public opinion in the border state of Maryland, as well as to forage supplies and seek new recruits. Lee envisioned the Army of Northern Virginia conducting a campaign of liberation in Maryland and had reason to believe that some Marylanders would join in the southern effort.<sup>1</sup> By fighting the enemy on his own territory, not only would it alleviate pressure on Virginia but also, if successful, could dissuade public support for continuing the war and ultimately force the Union to sue for peace. Admitting to President Davis that his army was ill-prepared for an invasion, General Lee was determined to conduct his campaign into Maryland regardless of the state of his army.<sup>2</sup> He declared to Davis that his intentions were to harass the enemy; however, he believed that a decisive victory on northern soil, if possible, could end the war. At the very least, Lee hoped that his presence in Maryland would draw Union forces out of Virginia.

Lee's first foray into northern territory following his victory at Second Manassas in late August 1862, he had a head start on General McClellan's Army of the Potomac into Maryland. McClellan's Army remained in the entrenchments recovering from their recent defeat in the Seven Days Battles. Because of his prudence, McClellan would not give chase to the



Confederate Army until he believed his army was up to the task. Knowing this, Lee divided his army geographically, sending General Thomas Jackson to seize the Union garrison at Harpers Ferry, while the remainder of his forces continued to move northwest toward Hagerstown, Maryland. However, once McClellan reacted, Lee quickly recalled Jackson, and reassembled the Army of Northern Virginia at Sharpsburg. This is where Lee would make his stand; however, the ground was unfamiliar to him and not of his choosing. The Maryland venture cost Lee and the Confederacy dearly. On September 17, 1862, both the North and South engaged in the bloodiest day of the war with total casualties approximating 23,000.<sup>3</sup> Even though the casualties for the North outnumbered those of the South, the percentage of the number of men lost was greater for the South. Following the battle, Lee abandoned his Northern campaign and retreated to southern soil.

### **A Perfect Victory**

Major General Joseph Hooker led the attempt of the Federals to seize the Confederate capital in the spring of 1863 at the Battle of Chancellorsville. General Lee's army clashed with Hooker's force west of Fredericksburg on May 1. Despite the Union's initial advantage provided by their surprise attack, Hooker chose to halt his assault and pull his troops back to Chancellorsville, thereby surrendering the initiative. As the Confederates continued to press the recoiling Federals back to Chancellor House, Lee rode the frontline looking for Federal weaknesses. He discovered unfavorable conditions for continuing the attack.

The next morning, Jackson's men commenced a march west to flank the unsuspecting Federals and just two hours before sunset they began the attack. As darkness set, the Confederates halted the attack in order to regroup. In an attempt to exploit their success, General Jackson and a small entourage set out on a reconnoitering mission in front of the confederate

line.<sup>4</sup> During his return, Jackson was accidentally shot and seriously wounded by his own troops. The Confederates attempted to exploit the advantage General Jackson had given them throughout the next several days by continuing to press the attack against the Federals. As the Union Army fell back, they anchored their flanks against the Rappahannock River. Now with both flanks secured on the river, the Federal Army would not budge. However, on May 6, Hooker began to withdraw his forces from the battlefield across the River to the north, effectively ending the battle.

### **Now What?**

One particularly negative aspect to the Battle of Chancellorsville was that Lee had lost his most prized commander and possibly the one man who agreed with him on nearly every issue. General Jackson had a unique ability to interpret and act on General Lee's elusive commander's intent vice requiring specific direction and clarification. Along with the loss of his premier commander, a number of other Confederate generals and mid-level leaders were casualties during the Battle of Chancellorsville. These were commanders that the Confederacy could not afford to lose. Lee defeated Hooker's Army of the Potomac, not by annihilation, but by forcing the Union General to withdraw his troops from the battlefield. Although he won a magnificent victory, the battle did little to achieve anything that really altered the operational and strategic situation in the South.<sup>5</sup>

As the Confederate Army remained on the Rappahannock River near Fredericksburg, they faced Union forces located on the northern side of the river. It was obvious that General Hooker would no longer give battle to the Army of Northern Virginia at Chancellorsville or Fredericksburg in the near future. Knowing the Federals would eventually reinforce with troops and supplies making Hooker's pause temporary, Lee had to make a choice on what to do next. He had several options. Some of his more viable options were, first, he could assume the

offensive and attack the Union troops across the Rappahannock River. Second, he could stay put and assume the defensive as he did at the Battle of Fredericksburg in the winter of 1862. Or he could fall back to the garrisons of Richmond and set up a defense around the southern capital. Lastly, he could undertake a second campaign into northern territory and threaten the Federal capital.

### **Evaluating Options**

As successful as Lee had been during Chancellorsville, continuing the attack across the river would be complicated. The Rappahannock River, which separated the Union and Confederate Armies, was impassable except by bridge.<sup>6</sup> Along with the water obstacle that the Confederates would have to overcome, the terrain beyond it favored the enemy. The high ground was on the northern side of the river while on the Confederates side of the river was open plains. The Federals clearly had the advantage over an approaching army because their artillery could cover large areas with gun placements on the heights. In addition, the Confederates had suffered almost 13,000 casualties at Chancellorsville and were unprepared to maintain the offensive across the Rappahannock. Lee knew that to continue the attack across the Rappahannock would be disastrous considering the numerous Confederate losses and lack of supplies. Lee's army needed time to recover and replenish. He identifies his hesitation to attack the Federals across the Rappahannock in a letter to President Davis on May 30, "I fear the time has passed when I could have taken the offensive with advantage...There may be nothing left for me to do but fall back."<sup>7</sup>

The option of assuming the defensive was the South's most conservative alternative. Considering the weak state of the Confederate's logistics and manpower, the most likely course of action taken by General Lee after Chancellorsville would have been to establish defensive posture in the vicinity of Fredericksburg and make the Army of the Potomac come to him.

Given that the Confederate grand strategy was one of primarily defensive warfare, the Fredericksburg terrain would be ideal. Making a stance at Fredericksburg would also coincide with Lee's proclivity to fight on the ground of his choosing. However, if he stayed, the possibility existed that the Union Army might never conduct a counterattack and instead would shift focus and advance against Richmond. As Colonel Charles Marshall, Lee's aide-de-camp, suggested, "If he [Lee] remained inactive the enemy would abandon his effort to dislodge him from his position at Fredericksburg, and would move his army to Richmond by water, as he could easily and safely do."<sup>8</sup> Lee believed an invasion of Richmond was a probable course of action by the enemy as he reveals in his letter to James A. Seddon, Secretary of War, on May 30:

...I think it is probable from the information received that General Hooker will endeavor to turn the left of my present position and hold me in check, while an effort is made by the forces collected on the York River, by forced marches and with the aid of their cavalry under General Stoneman to gain possession of Richmond...<sup>9</sup>

This would force Lee to deploy his army to defend in front of Richmond, which is exactly where he did not want to fight.

The option that was most inviting to General Lee was to take the Army of Northern Virginia on a campaign onto northern soil. The belief that Lee moved his army into Pennsylvania solely to feed them is false even though the Confederacy had severe supply problems. Alan Nolan states, "Collecting supplies and living off the Northern country was surely a motive for the campaign. But the Army of Northern Virginia was sustained in Virginia from July 1863 until the end of the war, so it was not necessary to go north for food and forage."<sup>10</sup> If gathering supplies for the army was truly the reason for moving north, it would have been more advantageous to have the cavalry or other mobile forces forage for food and supplies. By having smaller units gather supplies instead of moving the entire army north, they would be less susceptible to attack and more fruitful in their return.

A northern incursion into Pennsylvania in June of 1863 would upset Union plans for the summer campaigning season and possibly reduce the pressure on the Confederate capital, as well as Union pressure in the west at Vicksburg. Despite what the Federals were contemplating after Chancellorsville, Lee was convinced that taking the initiative was a far better strategy.<sup>11</sup> Not as a reason but as an extra benefit, his troops could live off the bountiful northern farmland and give a well-needed reprieve to the war ravaged agriculture of Virginia. The Confederate general believed that a series of victories in the North would have a more profound effect against the Union than any battle won on southern soil.

In addition, moving north and threatening the Federal capital would most certainly result in the Army of the Potomac giving chase. Lee was well aware that the Lincoln administration would not tolerate the presence of a Confederate force on northern soil threatening the Union capital.<sup>12</sup> As General Lee saw it, this was the best possible way for securing Confederate independence. He knew the Confederacy could never destroy the North's ability to make war; therefore, his only chance for victory was to erode the will of the North to make war. Lee envisioned that strengthening the Peace Party of the North and encouraging the idea that restoring the Union was not acceptable, from a cost-benefit standpoint, would lead to an early end of the war.<sup>13</sup>

### **Linking Operational and Strategic Objectives**

From the onset of the war, the South adopted a predominantly defensive strategy. The confederacy would quickly run out of resources if they engaged the Federals in a force-on-force battle of attrition. Nevertheless, fighting from the defense allowed for the use of counterattacks should the opportunity arise. The South could not stay on the defensive indefinitely though; they needed an offensive striking capability. Davis called this approach an "offensive-defensive" strategy.<sup>14</sup> The North was better resourced and equipped, as well as having the one asset the

South lacked -- manpower. Davis believed, as did much of the South that by prolonging the war and wearing down the enemy's resolve to continue would compel the Union to capitulate.

Nevertheless, by the summer of 1863, time was not on the Confederate's side due to constraints on resources and reinforcements. Both President Davis and General Lee acknowledged the South's declining power in troops and supplies. Lee clearly identifies this deficiency prior to Gettysburg in his letter to Davis on June 10:

We should not conceal from ourselves that our resources in men are constantly diminishing, and the proportion in this respect between us and our enemies, if they continue united in their efforts to subjugate us, is steadily augmenting...Its [Army of Northern Virginia] effective strength varies from time to time, but the falling off in its aggregate shows that its ranks are growing weaker and that its losses are not supplied by recruits.<sup>15</sup>

Following the Battle of Chancellorsville, Lee wrote an additional letter to President Davis in an effort to convince him that he should have more troops by stating, "The disproportion between our army and that of the enemy is too large to realistically expect success."<sup>16</sup> In this same letter on May 7, Lee extended an invitation for the president to visit him at Fredericksburg. However, instead of meeting Lee at Fredericksburg, Davis suggested the meeting take place at Richmond.

### **Lee Convinces Davis**

It was imperative that General Lee convince Jefferson Davis of the benefits of a northern excursion. In an effort to get the approval of the president, General Lee and his cavalry commander, General Stuart rode to Richmond on May 14 to meet with Davis. Over the course of the next two days, Lee conferred with both Davis and his cabinet to discuss the current situation of the Confederacy. The Army of Northern Virginia was having success in the Eastern Theater, but the military outlook for the Confederacy in the Western Theater was bleak. Of primary concern was Vicksburg, Mississippi. Considered the last viable southern stronghold on

the Mississippi River, General John Pemberton was holding off the Federal forces of General Ulysses Grant with just 30,000 troops, but was in dire straits and needed assistance in order to maintain defense of the city.<sup>17</sup>

In the midst of opposition from P. G. T. Beauregard, and General James Longstreet, who favored addressing the threat in the Western Theater, Lee advocated a different plan.<sup>18</sup> Lee effectively laid out his justification for conducting a northern invasion into Pennsylvania. He professed that by crossing the Potomac, he could shift the field of battle onto northern land, thus preventing Union efforts against Richmond. As an additional argument in an effort to convince Davis, Lee added that he could feed his army off the provisions in the North rather than the inefficient Confederate commissaries in the war-ravaged state of Virginia.<sup>19</sup> Collecting supplies and living off the Northern countryside was a benefit, but not a necessity for invading the North. In retrospect, this is evident in the fact that the Army of Northern Virginia sustained itself in Virginia from July 1863 until April 1865.<sup>20</sup>

Lee argued that by threatening Washington with the only successful army of the Confederacy, the Union would have to give chase and possibly shift troops from the Western Theater in order to protect their capital from seizure. He also advocated gaining the support of the rising Peace Party of the North. Because he lacked resources and manpower, he hoped to find support in the North by appealing to southern sympathizers.<sup>21</sup> He believed that the key to strategic success for the Confederacy was the anti-war sentiment among the northern populace. In a letter to his son, G. W. C. Lee, he stated, "Nothing now can arrest during the present administration the most desolating war that was ever practiced, except a revolution among their people. Nothing can produce a revolution except the systematic success on our part."<sup>22</sup> He did not think the Confederates could passively await the northern opinion to turn in his favor, but

needed to be an active agent in shaping Northern sentiments.<sup>23</sup> Over the course of the conference, Lee was able to convince Davis and his cabinet to support his endeavors across the Potomac. However, he needed to connect what he perceived as the center of gravity, the will of the northern populace and government to continue the war, with his operational strategies of attacking the North's critical vulnerability, the Federal Army, to achieve victory. Following the conference, Lee returned to his headquarters near Fredericksburg to begin planning for his northern venture.

### **Lee Reorganizes the Army**

The loss of numerous top and mid-level commanders at Chancellorsville, particularly General Stonewall Jackson, led Lee to reorganize the Army of Northern Virginia. Lee explained this reorganization in a letter written to Davis on May 20, "I have for the past year felt that the corps of this army were too large for one commander. Nothing prevented my proposing to you to reduce their size [and] increase their number, [but] my inability to recommend commanders."<sup>24</sup> Lee further proposed to Davis that he intended to divide his army from its current configuration of two corps and split it into three corps. He justified this by stating, "These [corps] are more than one man can properly handle [and] keep under his eye in battle in the country that we have to operate in. They are always beyond the range of his vision, [and] frequently beyond his reach."<sup>25</sup>

With Jackson gone, Lee reorganized his forces. By dividing Jackson's corps, Lee created three corps with three divisions each under the commands of Generals Longstreet, A. P. Hill, and Ewell, vice a two corps structure under the command of Jackson and Longstreet. Two of the three corps commanders (Hill and Ewell) had never led more than a division of troops into battle and were inexperienced at corps level of command. Additionally, three of the nine division



commanders were also untried at their new level of command.<sup>26</sup> In spite the inexperience, Lee's army was at its peak strength in terms of troops and morale with approximately 70,000.

### **Use of Maneuver Warfare to Accomplish a Strategic Objective**

Encouraged by his recent victory against the Army of the Potomac at Chancellorsville, General Lee believed that his Northern campaign had a high probability of success. Lee's perception of his army's invincibility fueled his audacious personality and decision-making process. He valued taking the initiative through offensive warfare and believed that if he were to achieve victory in the North, he would have to out maneuver the Federal Army. To gain a decisive victory on northern soil, General Lee also asserted that he would have to defeat his enemy in a series of smaller engagements in which segments of the Federal Army would be crushed in detail rather than in a single grand engagement.<sup>27</sup> Fighting a single battle of attrition against the Army of the Potomac on northern soil would be disastrous for Lee's army due to the North's numerical superiority.

By the time the Army of Northern Virginia began their march north, Lee had not decided upon the location of his next battle with the Army of the Potomac. His principal operational objective was to raise the cost for the Union to unacceptable levels and affect the will of the North to continue fighting. Prior to Lee's invasion, the Northern populace had not wholly experienced the travesties of the Civil War. If Lee battled the Federal Army on Northern soil, then the devastation of war in the North would create a state of panic amongst the public. He did not formulate a vision of how any particular battle would develop and decide his moves on tactical developments.<sup>28</sup> Having the smaller army, Lee could quickly react to Federal tactics. Knowing all too well not to fall in love with a set plan, he maintained flexibility and adjusted as the enemy reacted. More importantly, the defeat of Union Army was not his primary objective; it was a critical vulnerability and a means to exploit the North's will of the people.<sup>29</sup>

Lee understood what operational and tactical conditions favored his army the most and he could reasonably expect that his movements north would compel the Federals to maneuver as well. Not knowing where a particular battle would develop, he approached the campaign with flexibility in order to not limit himself and preserve his ability to respond swiftly to events as they unfolded.<sup>30</sup> From the onset of the campaign, Lee's plans were purposefully vague. He would go north and let the situation develop, take advantage of the mobility of his smaller force, and defeat segments of the enemy's army vice engaging in one grand battle. He intended to create a condition in which the faster army could react more rapidly to any given situation.<sup>31</sup> The Federals massive numbers, immense supply depots, and large logistics tail slowed them. By taking advantage of his army's responsiveness, Lee envisioned gaining the initiative by the use of speed and exploiting the Union Army's inability to reinforce isolated units quickly.

Lee believed that these small victories on northern soil would cause the battered Federal Army to withdraw temporarily in an attempt to recover. Over time, this would benefit Virginia and allow the southern state time to rest from the heavy burdens of war, but most importantly, he hoped it would deplete the northern morale to a point where it might produce a political peace revolution.<sup>32</sup> The negative aspect to his plan of circumstantial warfare was that it left too many variables undefined. Without a precise plan on when and where to engage the enemy, Lee left much to chance.

### **Trying to Make the Connection**

Lee's plan to affect the willingness of the North to continue with the war represented the crossroads of the strategic and operational levels of war. He knew that defeating the Federal Army in a single battle of annihilation was improbable. The Federals were far too strong in troops, material, and reinforcements. Even if he took the defensive on northern soil, the Federals would continue to send every available resource until they defeated the Army of Northern

Virginia. However, Lee could use speed and maneuver as his weapon. If Lee decreased the scale of the battles, he could increase their frequency. Although, doing so would require a thorough knowledge of the enemy's size, disposition, and location.

Lee makes this distinction in a letter written to Davis on June 10. Lee asserts, "Under these circumstances we should neglect no honorable means of dividing and weakening our enemies that they may feel some of the difficulties experienced by ourselves."<sup>33</sup> It is clear that his intent is to let the North feel the devastation of war, an operational strategy of bringing the destruction of war onto northern soil with a strategic view of affecting public opinion in an effort to force the Federal government to capitulate. Lee further states, "Should the belief that peace will bring us back to the Union become general, the war would no longer be supported, and that, after all, is what we are interested in bringing about."<sup>34</sup> He believed that once enough people in the North saw peace as a possibility, they might become so infatuated with the thought of ending the war that they would not resume it even if they found out the South was still determined to maintain their independence.<sup>35</sup> Although to be able to link his operational objectives with the strategic goal and execute his plan effectively would require a clear understanding of commander's intent by all of his subordinate generals. At a minimum, his corps commanders would need to know the endstate for going north; the *why*.

### **Getting the Message to his Generals**

Lee found himself in the unfortunate (albeit self-imposed) position of having a freshly reorganized army with two of the three corps commanders inexperienced at his method of issuing orders and providing commander's intent. Inevitably, this situation would have a dramatic effect on his army's performance at Gettysburg. The only corps commander left who was a veteran to Lee's inner circle and understood his method of command and able to operate from intent, General James Longstreet, had been absent from Lee's command since before

Chancellorsville. Furthermore, prior to Lee's meeting with Davis in mid-May, Longstreet had expressed his opposition to a northern invasion and was not wholeheartedly committed to this strategy. He supported a western concentration of forces, alleviating the pressure on Vicksburg, and assailing General Grant's lines of communication and supply; not moving north.<sup>36</sup> Lee needed cohesiveness and a clear understanding of the campaign goals on the part of his generals in order to be successful. However, the one commander who was thoroughly familiar with Lee's plan, General Longstreet, disagreed with it.

The restructuring of the Army of Northern Virginia and its commensurate changes in leadership should have necessitated a postponement; however, Lee hastened his movement into Pennsylvania. He did not delay moving north because of the pressure that the Federals were exerting in the West with General Grant's Army closing in on Vicksburg. Moreover, he could exploit the momentum of his army from the victory at Chancellorsville. Only three weeks following his return from meeting President Davis at Richmond, Lee's army was on the move. On June 3, Lee commenced his movement northwestward across the Potomac and the Blue Ridge Mountains along the Shenandoah Valley. The three corps of Longstreet, Hill, and Ewell moved through the Valley while Stuart's cavalry remained east of the mountains.<sup>37</sup>

During the march north and at the Battle of Gettysburg, Lee failed to recognize that his new commanders needed precise orders and direction. His preference for secrecy of command and lack of written orders would prove disastrous. He gave very little direction beyond his intent when it came to endstate. Alan Nolan states, "Lee at no time sat down and made a detailed and comprehensive statement of his view of the grand strategy for securing Southern independence."<sup>38</sup> At no other time during the Civil War was there a more imperative need for Lee to give thoroughly communicated orders and his vision of victory clearly understood than

during his preparations for the second Northern campaign. After all, one of his primary goals was to gain the popular support of the northern populace and he needed to communicate plainly, the *why* portion of the campaign plan to his corps commanders if they were going to be able to accomplish this ambitious goal. However, there is no mention of operational or strategic goals for Southern independence in his written communications to his corps commanders. Moreover, as soon as the Battle of Gettysburg commenced, all written communications to his generals ceased until after the battle.

If General Lee had articulated the operational objectives of invoking a peace revolution in the North and clearly expressed to his corps commanders his vision of what victory looked like, as he did to President Davis, this mistake may have been avoidable. However, Lee did not set himself up to reach his operational objectives or strategic goals successfully. Throughout the march north and during the Battle of Gettysburg, Lee's poorly communicated desire to maintain flexibility led to frustration, indecision, and even inaction on the part of his corps commanders. After receiving orders from Lee on June 30 to, "Proceed to Cashtown or Gettysburg as circumstances might dictate,"<sup>39</sup> historian Samuel Martin describes General Ewell's reaction after reading Lee's letter aloud to Generals Rodes, Early, and Trimble. Martin states, "Ewell sarcastically asked if anyone knew where they were supposed to go. He left no doubt that he was frustrated by Lee's continuing ambiguity."<sup>40</sup>

### **Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield**

Lee's next mistake leading to his ultimate failure during the Northern campaign was his poor use of cavalry. This blunder was two-fold. First, a lack of intelligence ensued due to his limited communication with General Stuart. Secondly, Lee's cavalry commander had a difficult time discerning his commander's intentions. During the Civil War, the cavalry routinely provided reconnaissance and intelligence gathering on the battlefield. In contrast, Lee's army

marched into southern Pennsylvania without knowing the enemy's size, location, or disposition. This intelligence gap did not stop Lee from moving his army into enemy territory. The first error is evident in a dispatch sent to General Stuart on June 22. This written communication shows that if General Stuart was conducting a reconnaissance mission that the intelligence he had gathered was not getting back to the Commanding General. In the letter, Lee stated, "Do you know where he [the enemy] is and what he is doing? I fear he [the enemy] will steal a march on us and get across the Potomac before we are aware."<sup>41</sup> Obviously, this implies that General Lee was oblivious to the Federal's whereabouts and had no idea of their intentions. If his operational plans were to maintain flexibility, let the situation develop and use maneuver to strike isolated segments of the Federal Army, he would have to do it blindly. The combined effect of corps commanders not knowing the strategic goals and operational objectives, in conjunction with a lack of intelligence from his cavalry units led to a blind Northern campaign.

Also, in his letter on June 22, Lee categorizes some specific tasks for Stuart to accomplish. He states,

If you find that he is moving northward, and that two brigades can guard the Blue Ridge and take care of your rear, you can move with the other three into Maryland and take a position on General Ewell's right, place yourself in communication with him, guard his flank, keep him informed of the enemy's movements and collect all the supplies you can for the use of the army.<sup>42</sup>

Furthermore, in his letter on the following day, Lee further expanded Stuart's task in his statement, "You will however be able to judge whether you can pass around their army without hindrance, doing them all the damage you can and cross the river east of the mountains...after crossing the river, you must move on and feel the right of Ewell's troops, collecting information, provisions etc."<sup>43</sup> These were the only two examples of anything resembling orders written to General Stuart in the days leading up to the battle. In examining these orders, five distinct tasks

are apparent. However, Lee's orders are vague and ambiguous with no clear guidance on commander's overall intent.

Although the *who* and *what* are present in all five tasks, Lee failed to explain the *when*, *where* and *why*. From reading these orders, General Stuart had no timeline in which to accomplish his tasks. He also did not have a deadline to report back to the Commanding General. More importantly, General Lee failed to mention the *why* or reason for Stuart's mission and how his tasks related to the overall campaign. If Stuart was able to discern the commander's intent, he may have been able to harmonize all five of the tasks. However, two of the specified tasks conflict with the cavalry's primary intelligence gathering mission. By collecting supplies and provisions, as well as, raiding and damaging to the enemy's rear area, General Lee detracted from the cavalry's ability to conduct a reconnaissance mission.

The failure to use the cavalry for intelligence gathering and Stuart's inability to discern commander's intent led to another mistake of Lee while moving his forces into Pennsylvania. It created an intelligence and communication gap since the terrain was unknown, and there was not any information about the size, disposition, or location of the Federal troops. This is unmistakably apparent in Lee's statement to Stuart, "Do you know where he is and what he is doing?"<sup>44</sup> There was concern that the enemy could start moving north without the Confederates' knowledge. Frequently, Lee referred to his cavalry as the "eyes" of the army and used them to identify enemy movements and critical vulnerabilities. Normally, the cavalry deployed in such a manner that the enemy could not make a move without him knowing of it, further contributing to the Confederate's use of maneuver to outpace the enemy and gain the advantage. This time he did not. The use of vague and conflicting orders, lacking purpose and endstate created a perplexed General Stuart. In retrospect, it is no surprise that Stuart's collateral missions

diminished the intelligence and reconnaissance functions and diluted the significance of his mission.<sup>45</sup>

### Conclusion

Lee believed the most efficient method of relieving the pressure in the West and against Richmond would be to gain a number of small decisive victories on northern soil.

Systematically destroying the Army of the Potomac would strengthen the hand of those in the North who favored peace and lead to an early end of the war.<sup>46</sup> Lee alludes to the offensive nature of his second northern invasion on several occasions in his letters to President Davis and James Seddon. Lee wrote on June 8, "There is always hazard in military movements, but we must decide between the positive loss of inactivity and the risk of action... As far as I can tell there is nothing to be gained by this army remaining quietly on the defensive..."<sup>47</sup> Again on June 13, Lee affirmed that his army is on the offensive as he stated, "You can realize the difficulty of operating in any offensive movement with this army if it has to be divided to cover Richmond."<sup>48</sup> He knew that he needed every soldier to attack into northern soil and could not afford to split his forces between Richmond, Pennsylvania, and the West.

From Lee's viewpoint, in a war of exhaustion, the main reason supporting the North's will to continue the war was the populace's faith that the Confederacy could be defeated and that the preservation of the Union was worth the cost.<sup>49</sup> The critical factor in Lee's plan was that he had to convince the northern populace and government otherwise. The North would have to conclude that preservation of the Union was not worth the cost in blood, treasure, and effort. However, his plan lacked detail. To bring the destructiveness of war to the North was not the difficult part, nor was winning a successive number of smaller battles. Both of these were possible as long as his intelligence was accurate, his commanders understood the *why* in his commander's intent, and he was able to choose when and where to engage the Federals. The



most difficult leadership challenge was physically bridging the gap between his operational goal of systematically destroying segments of the Federal Army and the Confederate's strategic objective of dissuading the North to maintain the Union.

During the opening hours of Gettysburg, Lee saw what appeared to be the ideal situation. A spy informed him that the Union Army was still some distance south and two of his corps were converging on a seemingly isolated portion of the enemy.<sup>50</sup> His campaign plan of maintaining flexibility and taking advantage of a developing situation with maneuver and speed was finally materializing. Lee initially perceived Gettysburg as potentially the kind of fight he was looking for. The first day at Gettysburg was extremely successful for the Confederates. They dominated enemy battle positions to the north and west of the town and as the Federal positions collapsed, Union soldiers began retreating to the high ground south of Gettysburg. The Confederates had beaten the enemy to the point that their sequencing of retreat was highly disorganized. By the evening on June 1, it was clear that the Confederates had won the day. Immediate success against this small section of the Federal Army lured the Confederate general into committing to the battle. However, Lee knew that the rest of the Northern Army would eventually reunite south of Gettysburg. In order for his plan to work, he needed to defeat this secluded segment of the Union Army quickly. Unfortunately, the enemy reunited faster than he expected. By mid-day on July 2, Lee realized that he was no longer in a fight with a portion of the Federal Army, but found himself in opposition of the entire Army of the Potomac. His numerical advantage had diminished sooner than anticipated. Lee's initial ambiguous plan of using maneuver and flexibility to maintain military superiority and initiative over the Federals was no longer relevant by day two of Gettysburg. The compounding effect of insufficient intelligence of the terrain and enemy, specific direction as to when and where to engage, and

ignorance of intent on the part of his corps commanders eventually allowed the Army of the Potomac to overwhelm him at Gettysburg.

In the end, a combination of mistakes led to General Lee's failure to link what he wanted to achieve tactically and operationally to how he saw victory for the Confederacy strategically in a second Northern campaign. His initial vision of maneuver warfare might have worked if he had the right mixture of corps commanders, and if he had clearly articulated the endstate for his vision of a Confederate victory. In hindsight, it is clear that Lee's audacious plan to produce such a profound effect on the North politically was based on assumptions that pushed perilously close to the edge of possibilities.<sup>51</sup> Lee's analysis of the North's center of gravity and critical vulnerability was correct in assessing the only way the Confederacy could succeed was through a war of exhaustion and the defeat of the North's political and popular determination to maintain the Union. However, in his assessment that the South had the political or military might to do this in one campaign, he was wrong. The ultimate dilemma for the Confederacy was the terms it demanded for ending the war. The secession of the South and the independence of the Confederacy were never acceptable terms to the North.<sup>52</sup> The South lacked critical time to make a war of exhaustion work. Therefore, Lee's vision of victory over the Federal Army and plan to accomplish it in a single campaign never would have worked unless he fought a battle of annihilation and won.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Emory M. Thomas, *Robert E. Lee: A Biography* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), 256.
- <sup>2</sup> Thomas, 256.
- <sup>3</sup> Walter Herron Taylor, *General Lee, His Campaigns in Virginia, 1861-1865: With Personal Reminiscences* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press), 135-136.
- <sup>4</sup> Civil War Home, *The Battle of Chancellorsville*, <http://www.civilwarhome.com/chancellorsvillebattledescript.htm>
- <sup>5</sup> Ethan Sepp Rafuse, *Robert E. Lee and the Fall of the Confederacy, 1863-1865* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008), 29.
- <sup>6</sup> Charles Marshall and Frederick Maurice, *Lee's Aide-De-Camp* [Aide-de-camp of Lee] (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000; 1927), 192.
- <sup>7</sup> Robert E. Lee and Clifford Dowdey, *The Wartime Papers of R.E. Lee* (1st ed., Boston: Little, Brown, 1961), 496.
- <sup>8</sup> Marshall, 190.
- <sup>9</sup> Lee, & Dowdey, 498.
- <sup>10</sup> Gary W. Gallagher, *Three Days at Gettysburg: Essays on Confederate and Union Leadership* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1999), 4.
- <sup>11</sup> Rafuse, 37.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid, 38.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid, 20.
- <sup>14</sup> Alan T. Nolan, *Lee Considered: General Robert E. Lee and Civil War History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 72.
- <sup>15</sup> Lee, & Dowdey, 508.
- <sup>16</sup> United States War Department, *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*. 128 parts in 70 vols. Series I, Vol. XXV, Parts II (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), 782.
- <sup>17</sup> Thomas, 288.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid

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- <sup>19</sup> Ibid
- <sup>20</sup> Gallagher, 4.
- <sup>21</sup> Robert E. Lee and Ralston B. Lattimore, *The Story of Robert E. Lee: As Told in His Own Words and Those of His Contemporaries* (1st ed., Philadelphia: Eastern National Park & Monument Association, 1964), 49.
- <sup>22</sup> Lee & Dowdey, 411.
- <sup>23</sup> Rafuse, 25.
- <sup>24</sup> Lee & Dowdey, 488.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid
- <sup>26</sup> Michael A. Palmer, *Lee Moves North: Robert E. Lee on the Offensive* (New York: John Wiley, 1998), 54.
- <sup>27</sup> Rafuse, 41.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid, 19-45.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid, 41.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid
- <sup>33</sup> Lee & Dowdey, 508.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 509.
- <sup>35</sup> Rafuse, 45.
- <sup>36</sup> Thomas, 288
- <sup>37</sup> Lee & Lattimore, 51
- <sup>38</sup> Nolan, 73.
- <sup>39</sup> Official Records, 444.
- <sup>40</sup> Samuel J. Martin, *The Road to Glory: Confederate General Richard S. Ewell* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Guild Press of Indiana, 1991), 203.

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<sup>41</sup> Lee & Dowdey, 523.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 526.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 523.

<sup>45</sup> Gallagher, 15-16.

<sup>46</sup> Al Kaltman, *The Genius of Robert E. Lee: Leadership Lessons for the Outgunned, Outnumbered, and Underfinanced* (Paramus, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000), 257.

<sup>47</sup> Lee & Dowdey, 504.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 513.

<sup>49</sup> Rafuse, 254.

<sup>50</sup> James I. Robertson, *General A.P. Hill: The Story of a Confederate Warrior* (1st ed., New York, N.Y.: Random House, 1987), 206.

<sup>51</sup> Rafuse, 41.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 254.

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